

Iran-United States Relations after the Islamic Revolution: A Failure of Detente

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Abstract

Relations between Iran and the United States have always been either frigid or antagonistic in nature since the Islamic Revolution. Over the past 43 years, some Iranian reformist officials have sought to de-escalate tensions and reestablish normal relations with the United States. In this study, five milestones in Iran's détente policy are examined. These cases include Iran's mediation in securing the release of American hostages in Lebanon, Iran's lucrative economic offer to the American oil company Conoco, Iran's intelligence assistance to the US in Afghanistan to combat terrorism, the submission of the so-called "Grand Bargain" proposal to negotiate and settle all points of contention with the United States—such as support for Hezbollah and Iran's presence in Iraq—and, finally, the JCPOA. In this study, using the "Process Tracing" method and analyzing primary sources such as US congressional records and IAEA reports, the factors influencing these cases are discussed in detail, and ultimately, the failure or ineffectiveness of each measure is presented through the words of American officials. The analysis of the détente cases supports the theory of "Empire, Client, Enemy States," demonstrating that rapprochement with Iran—which is considered an enemy state by the US—whether strategic, political, or economic, is likely to fail until the internal power structures in Iran and the nature of the Islamic Revolution change, and Iran's role toward the United States shifts from that of an enemy to a client state.

Keywords: Goodwill, Conoco, Geneva channel, Grand bargain, Empire.

Introduction

The relationship between the United States and Iran has become increasingly hostile in the midst of the chaotic international system. Tense relations and deterioration are not a shocking new occurrence; rather, they are the result of decades of challenges, betrayals, and mutual distrust. This decline has been influenced by numerous activities and events. Iran–US relations have been confrontational for decades, making this relationship one of the most difficult for the US to manage globally.

Given the complexity of US–Iran relations, determining the root causes of the long-lasting conflict between the two rivals is particularly challenging. While the majority, including both the general public and elites, believe that US–Iran relations were severed after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, this study examines the 40-year period of partial cooperation between the two countries. Repeatedly since the victory of Khomeini's revolution, Iranian governments offered olive branches, attempting to reestablish normal relations with the United States. However, the United States consistently missed these opportunities for various reasons. This paper aims to examine Iran's struggle to reestablish normal relations with the United States within its historical context and to provide a reasoned explanation for these failed efforts at *détente*.

The US foreign policy towards Iran in recent years and the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic after Khomeini's revolution have been among the preferred research subjects for scholars. However, unlike press coverage, the academic literature on Iran's efforts to de-escalate tensions with the US is not as extensive as it is on the aforementioned subjects.

This study differs from most scholarly literature on United States–Iran relations, which tends to examine the conflict in narrowly defined terms. Similarly, it departs from the debates in political journals and other serious media outlets, which predominantly focus on isolated events and often repeat politically charged arguments that fail to provide a deeper understanding of the core issues in Iran–US relations. After reviewing the existing literature on their turbulent relations, a gap in the research was identified. Despite ample academic studies and continuous political debates over Iran and the United States, comprehensive explanations for their 44 years of failed relations are rarely found. Hence, this study seeks to answer the following question: Why have Iran and the United States been unable to reestablish normal relations after the Islamic Revolution, despite Iran's repeated efforts?

1. Methodology

In this study, the Process-Tracing (PT) method is applied, a method used to develop and test theories (Collier, 2011). Process tracing is a qualitative method that uses probability tests to assess the strength of evidence for specified causal relationships, within a single-case design and without a control group (Punton & Welle, 2015). Beach and Pedersen (2013) outline three distinct types of process tracing: 1) theory-testing (deductive), 2) theory-building (inductive), and 3) explaining-outcome. Each employs a different approach to analyzing how a specific cause (A) led to a given outcome (B) within a case. In this study, the plan is to use the theory-testing (deductive) process-tracing method because:

- We know the cases of cooperation between the United States and Iran, or the instances where Iran extended a hand of friendship toward the United States.
- We posit a causal link between Iran's attempts and willingness to establish normal relations with the United States and the deterioration of bilateral relations (for example, whenever Iran assisted the US or extended an olive branch, the US either avoided reciprocation or imposed further sanctions).
- We believe we understand why these cases occurred, based on the aforementioned "Clients, Enemies, and Empire" theory, which explains why Iran's goodwill often leads to more hostile relations.
- We think there is a causal link between the attempts and will of Iran for a normal relationship with United States and deterioration of the two countries relations (for example, whenever we helped the US or sent an olive branch for them, they either avoided reciprocation or imposed more sanctions).
- We think we know why such cases happened, due to the abovementioned "Clients, Enemies and Empire" theory that explains why Iran's good will leads to more hostile relations.

In terms of theory-testing, the process-tracing method operates by presenting the observable implications (hypotheses) of a theory, along with alternative explanations that are inconsistent with the theory. Once these implications are identified, they are empirically tested to determine which are supported by evidence and which are not. Process tracing emphasizes the temporal sequence of events and requires fine-grained knowledge of the case (Collier, 2011).

Stephen Van Evera's influential typology of process-tracing tests distinguishes tests based on how they adjudicate between theoretical expectations (Van Evera, 1997):

- 1- Straw-in-the-wind tests:** Failure or passage of this test neither lends strong support for nor against the theory.
- 2- Hoop tests:** Failure to pass a hoop test can be disqualifying for a theory but passing the hoop test does not necessarily lend strong support for the theory.
- 3- Smoking gun tests:** Passing a smoking gun test lends strong support for theory, whereas failure does not necessarily lend strong support against the theory.
- 4- Double decisive tests:** Passing a double decisive test lends strong support for the theory while also lending strong support against alternative theories.

Therefore, in this study, the focus is on the Hoop and Smoking-gun tests, as these two are necessary and sufficient for process tracing. In sum, a Hoop test is considered passed if there is no denial or counter-evidence regarding a premise, while the Smoking-gun test is passed when near-undeniable evidence exists in primary and secondary sources.

The Straw-in-the-wind test is set aside because it is neither necessary nor sufficient to prove a premise and is too weak to rely on. In this study, the Double-decisive test is also disregarded because it is too stringent, completely excluding other possibilities. Given that the cases examined are historical and the evidence is partly derived from history books—which may be written subjectively or contain gaps that were never documented—it is not possible to rule out all alternative explanations. Therefore, the Double-decisive test is also discarded.

This study aims to test the “Clients, Enemies, and Empire” theory proposed by David Sylvan and Stephen Majeski in their book *US Foreign Policy in Perspective: Clients, Enemies, and Empire* (2009). To test this theory, four milestones of détente in the 43-year history of Iran–US relations were selected:

- 1- Goodwill begets goodwill
- 2- Conoco Deal
- 3- Geneva Channel
- 4- Grand Bargain

These cases were chosen because they represent key milestones of Iran's détente policy in the history of Iran–US relations after the Islamic Revolution, a period during which Iran became an enemy state in the eyes of the US. Ironically, all these cases occurred while reformist presidents were in power, namely Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami.

For the purpose of applying process tracing to these détente

cases, in addition to numerous secondary sources such as history books and press releases, a set of primary data was analyzed, including official documents from both the Iranian and American governments, as well as memoirs of influential actors directly involved in each case, such as Zarif, Mousavian, Picco, Crocker, and George H. W. Bush.

2. Results

These four cases were organized under four themes, namely: Regional Influence, Economic Overture, Intelligence Cooperation, and Strategic-Ideological Compromise. Each case is briefly described, and the argument is then presented based on the theoretical framework and methodology.

2-1. Iran's Regional Influence (Goodwill Begets Goodwill)

During the hostage crisis, the United States requested Iran to mediate the release of American hostages in Lebanon by leveraging its influence over Hezbollah, which was said to be responsible for the hostage-taking. The United States assured Iranian officials that “goodwill begets goodwill” and tacitly vowed to reciprocate. In fact, Iran received encouraging messages from Washington emphasizing that “goodwill begets goodwill.” President George H. W. Bush's inaugural address on January 20, 1989, gave the first indication that the US would welcome and reciprocate any form of assistance from Iran regarding the hostage crisis. At his inauguration ceremony, Bush delivered a speech that was brief and filled with generalities about the greatness of America and its spirit of good-neighborliness. Toward the end, he included a line intended for the Iranians: “There are today Americans who are held against their will in foreign lands,” he said, lapsing into the passive voice to avoid being overly direct. “Assistance can be shown here, and will be long remembered. Goodwill begets goodwill. Good faith can be a spiral that endlessly moves on”(Bush, January 20, 1989).

The meaning of Bush's words was clear. To ensure there was no doubt about the sincerity of this offer, Bush followed with a personal promise, backed by his authority as president: “Great nations, like great men, must keep their word,” he said. “When America says something, America means it—whether a treaty, an agreement, or a vow made on marble steps” (Bush, January 20, 1989).

Bush, in his book *All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings*, revealed one of his letters to Mrs. Say, indicating that he intended to use Iran's influence to secure the

hostages' release:

“As a further signal of commitment to resolving this tragedy, I intend to keep open lines of communication with all parties, including Iran, who have influence over hostage takers. Please be assured that your government will take advantage of all legitimate opportunities to obtain the safe release of all of our hostages” (Bush, 2014, p. 541).

Rafsanjani believed that a period of “goodwill for goodwill” would be a suitable starting point for bridging past troubles and establishing confidence-building measures, ultimately leading toward permanent peace with the United States. The Americans' offer of “goodwill for goodwill” caused a divergence between the schools of thought led by Ayatollahs Khamenei and Rafsanjani. Mousavian stated:

“In meetings I had with Rafsanjani on the hostage issue, he reaffirmed that there was no difference between the Supreme Leader and him on the need for Iran to assist with the release of the hostages. However, he added that Ayatollah Khamenei did not favor proceeding with this initiative based on President George H. W. Bush's proposal of ‘goodwill for goodwill,’ due to his profound doubt that the US administration would deliver any goodwill. Nonetheless, he reiterated that our grand strategy for détente with the West required removing the hostility between Tehran and Washington with a gradual move toward normal relations” (Mousavian & Shahidsaless, 2014, p. 113).

Rafsanjani expected that in exchange for the release of the hostages, Iranian assets worth billions of dollars would be unfrozen and returned. He held a press conference on October 24, 1989, attended by more than 100 reporters and television crews. Following the press conference, the Los Angeles Times reported on the “goodwill for goodwill” initiative:

“[Rafsanjani] repeated specifically his demand that the United States demonstrate ‘good will’ by releasing impounded Iranian assets ... Rafsanjani repeated a second demand: the release of three Iranians taken hostage in Lebanon in 1982 [i.e., Ahmad Motavasselian, Mohammed-Taghi Rastegar Moghadam, Mohsen Musavi]” (Nick & Williams, October 24, 1989).

Eventually, through a combination of patience, persuasion, persistence, and financial and political pressure, Iran convinced the Lebanese Shiites to release the Americans:

“Over the course of several weeks, from October to December 1991, Jesse Turner, Joseph Cicippio, Thomas Sutherland, Alann

Steen, and Terry Anderson all returned to heroes' welcomes at various American airports. The process culminated in an emotional Christmas reception at the White House that was broadcast on national television" (Ghazvinian, 2020, p. 438).

With Rafsanjani having upheld his end of the unwritten bargain, he expected reciprocity. However, when it came time for the United States to respond with its own goodwill gesture, the Bush administration renege. Ultimately, the United States chose not to reciprocate Iran's gestures of goodwill.

"Though an acknowledgment of Iranian assistance in Lebanon was made, on the day the final hostage was released, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater told reporters that Iran was 'still a terrorist state, and there's still no change in that.' When the hostages were all released, we didn't do anything," said Brent Scowcroft, Bush's National Security Advisor" (Sciolino, December 5, 1991; Parsi, 2007, p. 134).

Picco, the United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs and mediator between the two parties, highlighted the urgency for the Americans to reciprocate Iran's goodwill:

"It was nearly four months since Terry Anderson, the last of the American hostages in Beirut, had been freed, and the Iranians were growing restless. It was time for Washington to deliver its part of the implied quid pro quo" (Picco, 1999, p. 3).

He continued:

"[US National Security Advisor] Scowcroft had intimated at our first two meetings that the United States might have some difficulty living up to its 'promise' of three years earlier. Even so, I held out hope that the administration would give me something I could take to the Iranians. Perhaps I was in denial: the idea that a word given would not be kept was unacceptable to me, since my credibility had been essential to the success of my work" (Picco, 1999, p. 3).

The extent of the political risk taken by Rafsanjani and his supporters, and the degree to which they had put their credibility on the line, was illustrated in Picco's own experience:

"My failure to deliver the American side of the deal with the Iranians essentially rendered me a liar ... Going to Tehran was exactly what I had to do. I had to look into the eyes of President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and acknowledge my inadvertent deception" (Picco, 1999, p. 4).

Picco described his meeting with Rafsanjani in detail:

"... [I told Rafsanjani] that I had come to Tehran with news of broken promises. I explained that although the hostage operation

had been based on the assumption that a goodwill gesture from America would be offered, I had been informed by Washington that no reciprocity would be forthcoming” (Picco, 1999, p. 4).

3. Economic overture (Conoco Deal)

Rafsanjani viewed economic cooperation as a potential means to revive dialogue and relations with the US. After the US refusal to reciprocate Iran's efforts in securing the release of Western hostages in Lebanon, initiating another overture toward the US became extremely difficult. One of his significant efforts to restart Tehran's relations with Washington was the lucrative offer made to the American oil company Conoco Inc. to develop the offshore Sirri Island oil and gas fields. Because direct political rapprochement with the United States remained unlikely, Rafsanjani chose to leverage Iran's economic ties with Washington to create areas of common interest that could later pave the way for political rapprochement (CSMonitor, April 7, 1995).

In his attempts to expand Iran's economic relations with the international community, Rafsanjani had long fought to reopen Iran's oil industry to foreign companies. Iran opened bidding for production agreements for two of its offshore oil fields in 1994. The first oil contract after the revolution, worth \$1 billion, was expected to go to the French oil giant Total. However, after negotiating with Conoco, Iran announced on March 6, 1995, that the contract would go to the Americans. At that time, the project was the largest oil field development in Iran's history (CSMonitor, December 12, 1995).

Rafsanjani made every effort to convince the Supreme Leader to consider a new path of détente with the US through opening economic relations. Despite his profound mistrust, the Supreme Leader agreed with Rafsanjani's argument for establishing economic and technical ties with the US. Parsi claimed, “the deal was approved by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself” (2007, p. 186).

According to David Crist:

“When news of the deal reached Washington, both the State Department and the CIA supported it. The diplomats believed it could help defuse tensions, while the spies hoped it would permit better access to information inside Iran” (Crist, 2013, p. 449).

In addition:

“This would fit perfectly with President Clinton's new approach to foreign policy. Clinton asserted that, with the end of the Cold War, emphasis should be placed on economic rather than military instruments to advance foreign policy goals, such as the promotion

of democracy, which he believed America had previously neglected” (Welch, Gruhl, Thomas, & Borrelli, 2013, p. 572).

Finally, in March 1995, Iran announced that a contract had been signed, thereby extending an olive branch to the US. Shortly after Iran's announcement, the US government declared that it would obstruct the contract, calling it a “threat to national security” (New York Times, March 20, 1995). That year, a new Republican-controlled Congress had come into office, and the Conoco deal galvanized Republicans sympathetic to Israel. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) began lobbying against the deal, releasing a report titled *Comprehensive US Sanctions Against Iran: A Plan for Action*, calling for the United States to “cut all trade and economic ties with Iran.” In the 74-page study released on April 2, AIPAC argued that Iran must be punished for its actions against Israel (Jewish Telegraph Agency, April 12, 1995).

Due to pressure from Congress, AIPAC, and Israel, President Clinton swiftly terminated the deal by issuing two executive orders that effectively prohibited all trade with Iran. The White House made an abrupt U-turn on the Conoco deal. Clinton issued Executive Order 12957 on March 15, 1995, banning US investment in Iran's energy sector, and Executive Order 12959 on May 6, 1995, banning US trade with and investment in Iran. In effect, these orders placed an embargo on US investment in Iran's energy sector. Foreign companies intending to develop Iran's energy sector were threatened with American sanctions and were deterred from investing in the sector (Slavin, June 12, 2008).

Clinton did not stop there. His second executive order also banned any economic relations, including financial and commercial transactions, with Iran. The president accused Iran of seeking nuclear technology “in order to develop its capacity to build nuclear weapons” (Clinton, April 30, 1995). Iran's olive branch was once again rejected, with Rafsanjani noting the missed opportunity for rapprochement:

“This was a message to the United States which was not correctly understood,” adding that his government had to overcome a great deal of difficulty to sign the deal with Conoco (Wright, May 16, 1995).

However, the two executive orders were not the only response to Iran's extended hand of friendship. The Americans and the Zionist lobby were not satisfied with the presidential orders alone. On September 8, 1995, Senator Alfonse D'Amato introduced the Iran Foreign Oil Sanctions Bill to block the export of energy technology

to Iran by foreign firms. The bill eventually became law as the Iran–Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA). Its provisions were draconian: not only would US oil companies be banned from doing business with Iran, but any foreign oil company trading with Iran would be prohibited from doing business in the United States. On December 18, 1995, the legislation imposed sanctions on foreign investment in Iran's energy sector (Katzman, October 11, 2006). According to the Act, the US would impose sanctions on foreign companies investing more than \$20 million in Iran's oil industry.

A few days later:

“On December 31, 1995, Congress passed, as part of the Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1996, provisions which included \$18 to \$20 million to support covert operations against the Iranian government” (Gold, 2009, p. 139)

Never before had an American trade law imposed such restrictions. In effect, ILSA forced dozens of major multinational oil companies to choose between initiating business in Iran or continuing operations in the United States. Clearly, the latter was the easier and safer choice (Mackinnon, July 15, 1995).

4. Intelligence Cooperation (Geneva Channel)

In the days following 9/11, Bush decided to bomb Afghanistan, remove the Taliban, and “smoke out” al-Qaeda from its hiding places. At the time, Iran's parliament and executive office were dominated by reformists, who welcomed any improvement in relations with the US. The decision was supported by Iran, which had suffered attacks from neighboring terrorists against civilians several years earlier. Iran was also concerned about the extremist Salafis and the Taliban, whose ideologies were viewed as hostile to Shia Iran and dangerous to the broader region (Mousavian & Shahidsaless, 2014). The Iranians, in coordination with the Bush administration's special envoy for Afghanistan, James Dobbins, initiated a top-secret series of meetings in Switzerland, later dubbed the “Geneva Channel.” “The Iranians had the contacts to help us in Afghanistan, and appeared willing to use their influence in a constructive way,” said Flynt Leverett, a CIA officer serving as the Director for Middle East Affairs at the National Security Council. “Secretary Powell dispatched Ryan Crocker to meet with the Iranians in Geneva. As cover, the Italians and Germans were included to avoid the appearance of direct talks. But in fact, these were the first face-to-face discussions between the two nations since 1986” (Crist, 2013, p. 481).

Parsi also emphasized:

“In the initial meetings, German and Italian delegations attended to provide Iran and the United States with political cover. Their presence gave the talks a multilateral appearance. In reality, however, the discussions were bilateral and constituted the highest-level contacts between officials of the two countries” (Parsi, 2007, p. 227).

“The meetings received the quiet approval of Secretary of State Colin Powell and continued in secret for nearly a year and a half, until the spring of 2003” (Ghazvinian, 2020, p. 479).

Mousavian revealed that Iran, dominated by reformists at the time, pursued two objectives in the meetings:

“First, we sought ways to unseat the Taliban and eliminate extremist terrorists, namely al-Qaeda. Both of these groups were based in Afghanistan, and both were arch-enemies of Shias and the Iranian government. Second, we wanted to explore avenues of cooperation with the Americans, thereby decreasing mistrust and tension between us” (Mousavian, 2014, p. 167).

Over the following 18 months, direct communication between Washington and Tehran regarding Afghanistan yielded several significant outcomes. Iran provided valuable tactical cooperation to the United States during Operation Enduring Freedom and contributed to the establishment and stabilization of the post-Taliban government in Kabul. US interlocutors reported that, at various points, Tehran also offered to participate in a US-led training program for the Afghan army and to initiate a counterterrorism dialogue with Washington (Maloney, 2008, p. 32).

In the words of Dobbins, Iran's behavior during the crucial initial stages of the war in Afghanistan was “comprehensively helpful” to the United States. At one of the Geneva Channel meetings, in early November, the Iranians unfolded a large map of Afghanistan and gave American officials an impromptu lecture on the mistakes in their bombing campaign:

“They gave us, I thought, a tremendous amount of assistance in terms of military targets on the ground, and in terms of who's who in Afghanistan,” recalls Hillary Mann Leverett. “We had no clue who any of the figures were, good or bad. They had not only tremendous knowledge, but also relationships with many of those people” (Ghazvinian, 2020, p. 480).

Crocker, the US Ambassador in Afghanistan, described the atmosphere of the talks:

“You want their order of battle? Here's the map. You want to

know where we think their weak points are? Here, here, and here. You want to know how we think they'll react to an air campaign? Do you want to know how the Northern Alliance will behave? Ask us. We've got the answers; we've been working with those guys for years. This was an unprecedented period since the revolution—a US–Iranian dialogue on a particular issue where we had common interest and common cause” (Crocker, September 17, 2012).

In return, the Iranians expected that the United States would finally recognize that the real threat came from Sunni extremists, not Shias. They optimistically hoped that their sincere cooperation in fighting terrorism would influence Washington and create an opportunity to realign their cold relationship.

In spite of Iran's central aid to the United States in Afghanistan, the Bush White House showed little receptivity to Iranian goodwill measures. In a surprising reaction, the administration did not consider Iran's anti-terrorism efforts significant. Not everyone in the US government agreed on the wisdom of talking to Iran:

“When Paul Wolfowitz heard of the Crocker mission, he wanted it shut down. John Bolton concurred, seeing it as a reward for bad behavior and distrusting anything coming out of the mouth of an Iranian official. One of the most strident opponents was William Luti, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. He openly advocated regime change rather than what he saw as fruitless talks with a duplicitous nation. Crocker, however, supported meeting with the Iranians. I generally believe in talking to anyone who will talk to you. Maybe you will persuade them; maybe you'll neutralize them; maybe you can just mess with their mind” (Crist, 2013, p. 483).

When the US accomplished its anti-terrorism objectives in Afghanistan, thanks to Iran's strategic consultations, the narrative was reframed as a clash of civilizations—a story of confrontation between nations committed to Western-style liberal democracy and those that were not. Iran, Iraq, Hezbollah, and Hamas were now grouped together with al-Qaeda and presented to the American public as an evil force threatening the American Dream.

Finally, on January 29, 2002, Bush delivered his famous speech before 52 million Americans:

“Iran, Iraq, and North Korea constitute an Axis of Evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” He also stated that Iran “aggressively pursues these weapons of mass destruction and exports terror” (Bush, January 29, 2002).

5. Compromise on ideological red lines (Grand Bargain)

In on 4 May 2003, the Iranian government sent a proposal to Washington, in which Tehran offered the Bush administration direct talks over a wide range of issues. The offer was made through two channels: an officially deniable fax sent directly to the US State Department by the Iranians, and a separate informal communication to the State Department from the Swiss embassy, which represented Iranian interests in the US. This offer was later nicknamed the “Grand Bargain” (Dudgeon, May 4, 2020). The Iranians were putting all their cards on the table, declaring what they wanted from the United States and what they were willing to offer in return (Gwertzman, March 31, 2006). “That letter went to the Americans to say that we are ready to talk, we are ready to address our issues,” said Mohammad Hossein Adeli, who was then a deputy foreign minister in Iran (Corera, September 25, 2006).

According to Kristof of The New York Times, “for political reasons, doves in both the US and in Iran prefer to present the grand bargain idea as originating on the other side, for neither wants to signal any political weakness. So this document arrived in the Iranian Foreign Ministry and purported to come from the US; it was described as a US initiative, but I can't find anyone in the US who acknowledges having prepared it. In any case, this was the starting point. Then Ambassador Zarif edited it. It was approved as the master statement of the Iranian position. Iran faxed it to the State Department and sent it, through an intermediary, to the White House” (Kristof, April 28, 2007).

Here are parts of the document:

Iranian aims:

(The US accepts a dialogue "in mutual respect" and agrees that Iran puts the following aims on the agenda)

- **Halt** US hostile behavior **and** rectify **the status of Iran in the US**: (interference in internal or external relations, "axis of evil," terrorism list.)
- **Abolishment of all sanctions**: commercial sanctions, frozen assets, judgments (FSIA), and impediments in international trade and financial institutions.
- **Iraq**: democratic and fully representative government in Iraq, support of Iranian claims for Iraqi reparations, respect for Iranian national interests in Iraq, and religious links to Najaf/Karbala.
- **Full access to peaceful nuclear technology, biotechnology, and chemical technology.**
- **Recognition of Iran's legitimate security interests in the**

region with an appropriate defense capacity.

- **Terrorism:** pursuit of anti-Iranian terrorists, above all MKO, and support for the repatriation of their members in Iraq, decisive action against anti-Iranian terrorists, above all MKO and affiliated organizations in the US.

American aims:

(Iran accepts a dialogue "in mutual respect" and agrees that the US puts the following aims on the agenda)

- **WMD:** full transparency for assurance that there are no Iranian endeavors to develop or possess WMD, full cooperation with IAEA based on Iranian adoption of all relevant instruments (93+2 and all further IAEA protocols).
- **Terrorism:** decisive action against any terrorists (above all Al-Qaida) on Iranian territory, full cooperation and exchange of all relevant information.
- **Iraq:** coordination of Iranian influence for activity supporting political stabilization and the establishment of democratic institutions and a non-religious government.
- **Middle East:** The US aimed for Iran to stop all material support to Palestinian opposition groups such as Hamas and Jihad and to pressure them to cease violent actions against civilians within the 1967 borders. It also sought action to transform Hizbollah into a purely political organization within Lebanon and for Iran to accept the Arab League Beirut declaration, based on the Saudi initiative and the two-states approach.¹

I personally asked Dr. Zarif about the authenticity of the above document, and he confirmed that this was Iran's response to the US proposal, but he said it was the Americans who took the initiative initially. Dr. Zarif also said that some Iranian officials, including himself, believed that Richard Armitage initiated the offer and sent it to Sadeq Kharrazi through a European intermediary because the text of their offer was written in English, not American.²

But surprisingly, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney insisted it was not even worth talking about in front of the president. "We thought it was a very propitious moment to do that," recalled Powell's chief of staff. ut surprisingly, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney insisted it was not even worth talking about in front of the

1. Retrieve the complete document from:

<https://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/04/28/irans-proposal-for-a-grand-bargain/>

2. My personal inquiry to Dr. Zarif on January 5, 2023.

president. "We thought it was a very propitious moment to do that," recalled Powell's chief of staff. "But as soon as it got to the White House, and as soon as it got to the Vice-President's office, the old mantra of 'We don't talk to evil'..." reasserted itself (BBC, January 18, 2007). "Hard-liners in the Pentagon and the Vice President's office interpreted the Iranian proposal—probably correctly—as a sign of weakness. Iran could have made this offer—one that blatantly countered its official ideology—only because it was weak and desperate, they argued. These officials opposed a deal with Iran no matter what the ayatollahs offered, because, they said, America could get what it wanted for free by simply removing the regime in Tehran (Parsi, 2007, p. 248).

Still, there is a big controversy surrounding who put the offer in place first. In my opinion, recognizing the initiator is important but makes no difference either in the outcomes of the proposal or in the message it conveyed in the end. Finally, "Instead of simply rejecting the Iranian offer, the Bush administration decided to punish the Swiss for having delivered the proposal in the first place. Only a few days after its delivery, Washington rebuked Guldemann and the Swiss government for having overstepped their diplomatic mandate. But the message to Tehran was clear—not only would the Bush administration refuse Iran the courtesy of a reply, but it would also punish those who sought to convey messages between the two" (Parsi, 2007, p. 249).

6. Discussion

In this study, both the Hoop Test and Smoking Gun Test are passed, and my premise that Iran's reconciliatory attempts will probably fail in the future is confirmed. The four cases of Iran's *détente* passed the Hoop Test because almost all the narratives of the cases, as described in the above-mentioned primary and secondary sources, were reviewed, and the mainstream narratives of past experiences confirm the premise. Since no disconfirming evidence or denial from American officials could be found, the Hoop Test is passed.

The four cases of Iran's *détente* passed the Smoking Gun Test because the cases are recounted either by the actors involved in the incidents or by acclaimed history books and reputable press sources, and since the cases have been confirmed by official records, the Smoking Gun Test is also passed.

According to the theory, the US considers itself the empire of the world, and the rest of the countries are either clients or enemies of the United States. "In the case of Iran, the CIA-assisted coup against

Mossadeq in 1953 led to Iran's becoming a US client state, with considerable resources being invested by the US in building up the Shah's regime. The United States provided constant military and intelligence help to maintain Iran as its client. But after the Revolution of 1979 and the overthrow of the Shah, the United States lost one of the most strategic clients in Asia, and Iran metamorphosed into an enemy state. Since then, Iran has been among the top five enemies of the United States” (Sylvan & Majeski, 2009, p. 121).

In fact, the gist and core of the theory for this study are summarized in the following paragraphs:

In a world of theoretically separate and independent political units, a state that is seen as rejecting the norms proclaimed by existing or rising imperial powers will tend to be seen by the latter as endangering other units, to the extent that there can be no genuine peace with that state unless and until it has changed not only its foreign policy but, above all, its internal power arrangements (Sylvan & Majeski, 2009, pp. 176-177).

The theory frankly states that “the general danger [of the enemy states] is structural in character: even if enemies are certified as being on good behavior and not trying to subvert US clients, the systematic nature of the policy choices they are supposed to have made means that they represent – if only by their continued existence – an ongoing potential threat to various clients” (Sylvan & Majeski, 2009, p. 179).

My argument is that Iran's first significant case of *détente* with the United States, which involved exerting regional influence and intermediating the release of American hostages, did not lead to better relations with the US. Iran's second case of *détente*, which involved offering a lucrative economic proposal as an olive branch to the US, not only did not win over the Americans but also led to unprecedented sanctions against Iran. Iran's third case of *détente*, which involved providing intelligence assistance to the US in fighting terrorism in Afghanistan, did not remove Iran from the United States' list of “State Sponsors of Terrorism.” Finally, Iran's fourth case of *détente*, which involved giving the US a green light regarding withdrawal from Iran's strategic and ideological red lines, failed entirely because Iran was still considered an enemy state in the eyes of the empire, i.e., the United States.

According to the theory, “even if enemies are certified as being on good behavior ... they represent – if only by their continued existence – an ongoing potential threat” to the US Empire-Client system

(Sylvan & Majeski, 2009, p. 179). Moreover, “policies of routine hostility [of the US] are maintained toward enemies regardless of what the enemies do” (Sylvan & Majeski, 2009, p. 180).

Conclusion

The United States and Iran have had a troubled relationship characterized by distrust and violence for more than 40 years, while Iranian officials, especially the Reformists, have struggled to cooperate with the US when both governments recognized that they had some interests in common. In other words, détente has always been at the top of the Iranian reformists' agenda.

This study scrutinized and traced four milestones of Iran's détente policy after the Islamic Revolution, each of which was regarded as a diplomatic or peaceful solution to reconcile with the United States for Iranian reformists and as missed opportunities for American doves. In conclusion, the fundamental question of this study is answered: Why could Iran and the United States not reestablish normal relations after the Islamic Revolution despite Iran's repeated détente?

The only cogent reason, as clarified by Sylvan and Majeski, is that the “internal power arrangements” of Iran are not consistent with US policies. In a nutshell, Iran is not a client of the United States. By obeying US norms and avoiding endangering the US Empire-Client system, any country can have normal relations with the United States despite its nuclear weapons program and human rights violations.

Therefore, for the United States, the threat of Iran is neither due to its nuclear program nor the accusation of distributing weapons of mass destruction, nor its human rights violations, if any. The main reason that Iran's détente did not lead to better relations with the US is that, for the United States, about Iran, “the general danger is structural in character: even if enemies are certified as being on good behavior and not trying to subvert US clients, the systematic nature of the policy choices they are supposed to have made means that they represent – if only by their continued existence – an ongoing potential threat to various clients. To counter this, US policymakers have been led over the years not only to act on behalf of clients but against enemies” (Sylvan & Majeski, 2009: 179).

The Islamic Republic of Iran structurally threatens the US Empire-Client system because it insists on independence, as proclaimed in the very first days of the Islamic Revolution. More importantly, it presents a role model to other countries in the world,

showing that it is possible to survive under sanctions for more than 40 years and to develop and progress without being a US client.

Chomsky frankly stated that “the main target is Iran, not because of the ugliness of the state, which indeed is very ugly, but the US tolerates the same or worse elsewhere. It is because Iran is the one country in the region that is not succumbing to US power, and that cannot be tolerated. Therefore, it's an enemy that has to be destroyed” (Helali, 2022, p. 5).

Thus, détente has usually failed and will probably fail unless the nature of the Islamic Revolution and Iran's “internal power arrangements” are altered. My conclusion is reinforced by the statement of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei on October 21, 2015, about the nature of the Islamic Revolution and the root causes of US hostility toward Iran:

“...The political experts of the world and the public opinion of many nations clearly recognize that the cause of this endless hostility is the nature and identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran...” (Khamenei, October 21, 2015).

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